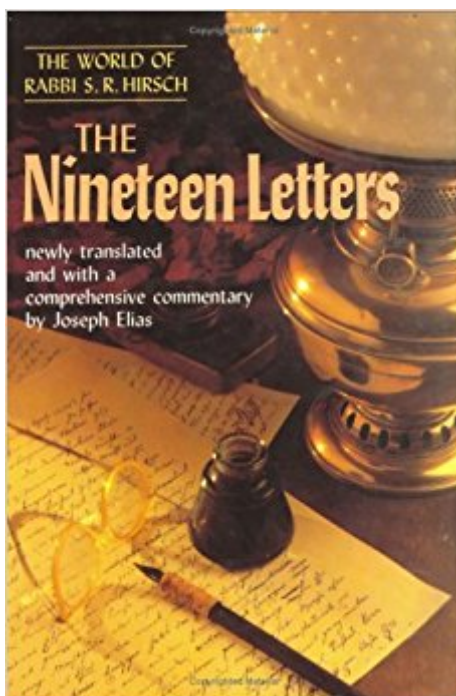


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The Nineteen Letters: The World Of Rabbi S. R. Hirsch



Synopsis

The veracity of Judaism is always being challenged in every age, in every culture. So what is Judaism's response? First published in 1836, *The Nineteen Letters* a written correspondence between a Rabbi and a student in doubt as to the meaning and value of his Jewish identity - remains as relevant today as when it first appeared. In upholding the tenets of Judaism, the author tackles the issues of assimilation, secularism, modernity, reform, and the difference between a self-centered world-view vs. a God-centered world-view. Grounded in history and tradition, and spanning the theological, philosophical, and the practical, the author shows how a life steeped in adherence to Divine commands leads to an uplifting experience of profound meaning and personal fulfillment. This enduring classic now includes an in-depth, contemporary commentary, and the result is an inspiring guide to a renewed appreciation of Judaism: both a brilliant portrayal of the Torah's timeless teachings and a unique presentation of its relevance in our own day and age.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Text: English (translation) Original Language: German

Anyone with the slightest interest in Torah true Judaism (and that includes all denominations of Judaism as well as non-Jews) should read the book. It is written in a simple discursive way and will not alienate anyone. Disagreement is possible, but should not put off the reader. If one has no knowledge of what Orthodox Jewry believes and acts on, then it is imperative to understand just what one is "against". Have a glance at the current Western world and its pursuit of pleasure and

satisfaction with no regard for standards and you will have a glimpse of the future. One can always define deviancy downward, but no one ever considers the ultimate cost.

Basic reading for every Jew who wants to understand their religion complying to reason

very interesting and informative reading

wonderful book with so much to teach!

thoughtful and life altering.

Beautiful.

This is one of the very best books on Torah, the Jewish path, and its relevance in our lives. Hirsch was not only brilliant but also a very fine writer. He lived in a difficult time for Jews when a once strong community was being threatened by the forces of ignorance which, in the name of science and modernity, sought to challenge G-d as our creator and refuge. This "enlightened" view which later unleashed even more horrific expressions culminating in the destruction of much of European Jewry by the Nazis, those who said that man is god, is here presented in the name of a young Jewish German intellectual who challenged the traditional Jewish view of G-d and Torah as sacrosanct. The rabbi responds to him in a series of very powerful letters. This translation by Elias is by far the best of any up to now. This is a book that withstands the test of time. I return to it again and again and each time I learn so much more. It is indeed a humbling experience to read Rabbi Hirsch's magnum opus.

The basic structure of the book is as follows: at the beginning, a character invented by Hirsch expresses his disenchantment with Judaism, and Hirsch responds. At this point, one might think that Hirsch argues in favor of the Torah being a Divine invention that Jews should therefore obey. Instead, Hirsch assumes this to be the case (thus immediately winning the argument by his criteria) and goes off in an entirely different direction. Hirsch focuses on the reasons for the ritual mitzvos (that is, the details of the parts of Jewish law not obviously related to ethics). Why did God (according to Hirsch) command us to do all these things? Hirsch says that the overall purpose of Revelation was to make the Jews a role model, leading to the perfection of humanity. In particular,

writes Hirsch, the purposes of non-ethical Jewish law are to isolate the Jews to keep them distinctive and to orient Jews towards divine service through symbolic acts; for example, the mezuzah aids in the "Consecration of our home as a sanctuary of God and of our life in it as service of God." (p. 182). Whether the world has in fact been significantly perfected is, of course, a difficult question. Finally, Hirsch criticizes conventional Jewish education and other Jewish philosophers. As to the former, Hirsch asserts that Jewish educators do not focus enough on Bible (as opposed to Talmud), and that they often mummify the laws by not focusing on the spirit behind those laws. On the other hand, Hirsch criticizes Moses Maimonides and Moses Mendelsohn for not focusing enough on the reasons for the details of Jewish law, causing some people to misunderstand their works and move away from observance, which in turn caused an anti-intellectual counterreaction which contributed to the mummification of Judaism. The commentary is far longer than the book itself, perhaps unnecessarily so. Although some of Elias's remarks do explain this book, others seem devoted to settling scores with other commentators who Elias thinks have misread Hirsch, or to tangents only slightly related to this particular work (e.g. Hirsch's attitude towards Kabbalah). Elias is especially interested in arguing that Hirsch is not the precursor of Modern Orthodoxy; although Hirsch, like Modern Orthodox Jews, believes that Jews should be integrated into modern society, Elias claims that Hirsch's interpretation of Jewish law was more rigid than that of most Modern Orthodox Jews.

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